

# Voluntary Repatriation from the Royal Thai Government Temporary Shelters to Myanmar

11th November 2016



UNHCR staff bid farewell to refugees on the bus at the Thailand-Myanmar Friendship bridge before the departure - 26 October 2016

On 25th and 26th October 2016, seventy-one refugees (representing 20 families) participated in the first voluntary repatriation from Thailand to Myanmar organized bilaterally between the two governments with support from UNHCR and other agencies.

Having spent many years in Nupo and Tham Hin camps, refugees returned to seven states, nine townships and eighteen different villages, where they are currently settling themselves with the support of township authorities and local social support networks. While most returnees returned to Kayin, others returned to Yangon, Kachin, Bago, Mon, Tanintharyi and Rakhine.

This historic event came after years of preparation by the respective governments, UNHCR, NGOs, CBOs, refugee committees and other refugee stakeholders. Refugees in Nupo, Tham Hin and other camps approached UNHCR in late 2015 to express their intention to return home. After initial protection counseling by UNHCR in April 2016, the list of potential returnees was shared with the governments of Myanmar and Thailand for their approval, or “green light”. This is an important step in the facilitated voluntary return process and is a key UNHCR benchmark in supporting refugees’ return.

In September 2016, the Myanmar Government sent a delegation to visit Nupo and Tham Hin camps to verify the refugees’ nationality and issue them with Certificates of Identity (CoI), or temporary travel documents. In October, following a bi-lateral meeting between the two governments, the “green light” was given to facilitate the return of this first group. UNHCR quickly informed the families and reconfirmed their intention to return. UNHCR also shared relevant information related to the assistance package and other pre-departure information such as the transport arrangements and documentation processing.

UNHCR does not advise refugees whether to return -- this decision rests with them as individuals -- but UNHCR helps them to make well-informed decisions based on information available.

Out of the original list of 96 individuals hoping to return, 25 decided to withdraw due to individual concerns including a preference to wait until the planting season and school holidays. Prior to facilitating return, UNHCR ensured that four benchmarks were met: (1) voluntariness; (2) no immediate protection risk; (3) “green light” by Myanmar Government; and (4) UNHCR or partner access to return areas.

The facilitated voluntary repatriation was led by the two governments, with the support of UNHCR and its partners, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Handicap International (HI) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

NGOs and camp committee members also helped to support the return preparation, including ensuring that they had the necessary documentation regarding health, education and training received in the camps, as well as providing some non-food items (NFIs). In addition to protection counseling provided by UNHCR, the following assistance package was offered to verified returning refugees:

- Mine-risk awareness session organized by Handicap International;
- Cash assistance in 4 components:
  1. Transport grant to support travel from the Thai border to the return location in Myanmar (THB 1,800 per person);
  2. Reintegration grant (THB 1,800 per person);
  3. Household support grant (THB 3,600 per adult and THB 1,800 per child)
  4. Food support for 3 months (THB 1,100 per person supported by World Food Program)
- Mosquito nets;
- WASH kits (distributed by ARC in Nupo and IRC in Tham Hin);
- Organized transport from the temporary shelters to the transit location across the border

In addition, the Myanmar Government organized additional support for returning families.

For the family returning from Tham Hin temporary shelter, they were transported to the Htee Kee border-crossing point where they were

met by authorities and accompanied to their return location in Myitta Township in Tanintharyi region. The family intends to start a small business selling ice-cream and roti. All their children are attending schools in Myitta Town and the education certificates issued by their school in Tham Hin helped them to integrate into the local school. The family has also begun the process of applying for a household list and civil documents.

For the families from Nupo temporary shelter, they were transported to the Myawaddy border-crossing point (Friendship Bridge) in Mae Sot. After a brief ceremony organized by the governments, they were accompanied across the border to a center for migrants in Myawaddy, where some stayed for up to 3 days. While at the center, they were provided with meals, accommodation, NFIs and medical screening.

UNHCR Myanmar confirmed that all returnees have safely reached their return destinations and have begun the process of settling in. During the month of November, UNHCR Myanmar staff will monitor the return of all 20 families. These updates will be shared with refugees in the Thailand.

UNHCR will continue to work closely with the Thailand and Myanmar governments, IOM, NGOs, CBOs, KRC and KnRC, donors and other stakeholders to ensure that up-to-date information is provided to refugees on the voluntary repatriation process. UNHCR Protection teams are always available to counsel any refugees who are interested in return, and they are encouraged to approach UNHCR and the Voluntary Repatriation Centers (VRCs) in each camp where they can receive more information.



UNHCR staff assists a refugee family in Nupo camp as they walk to the bus waiting to depart.

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UNHCR interpreter assists one of the families in Nupo to talk to the medical staff.

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Regional funding and funding for Thailand was also received through private donations from Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States of America.